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ETHICS AND THE NEO-MALTHUSIANISM

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It was part of Comte's philosophy that a positive science, cold, rigid, and practical, was to take the place of religious dogmas and creeds in the regeneration of society. Paley would reduce all social questions to expediency. With him those changes should be introduced which appear expedient. John S. Mill, who taught a philosophy without a soul or feeling and viewed man as struggling with his fellow-men without pity or conscience, would regulate all social activities by the most heartless exactions. Herbert Spencer elaborated a whole system of ethics and social science without need of religion.

The writer claims that no basic principle of social questions can be considered apart from religion. He refers, not only to the revealed religion of the Old and New Testaments, but to the relationship of the creature to the Creator evinced by reason. Natural theology relies upon reason to prove the existence of God. Ethics based upon reason points out the duty of the creature to God, to himself, to his fellow-man, and to society. The conclusions of natural theology and ethics, while not relying on the authority of the Bible, cannot in the nature of things be opposed to the teachings of the Sacred Book, or of the church; for truth is one, whether it is derived through the reasoning faculties of man or comes as a direct revelation from God.

Neo-Malthusianism of its very nature stands condemned both by religion and by the light of natural reason. We shall here restrict our paper to the consideration of the latter.

To be sure of our terms, what is neo-Malthusianism? When Malthus advocated birth limitation he did so on the plea that if the human race continued to develop in the same proportion as it was then developing, the earth would not be able to support the teeming millions who would soon swarm upon its surface. He

was ignorant both of human ingenuity and of the earth's productivity. Looking back at the question calmly and scientifically, it is strange indeed to see how his false teachings were snatched up and propagated by the leading social and economic writers of the day. Men were frightened into the belief that the gaunt specter of hunger was already at the door. Catholic social thought was never drawn into the vortex of Malthus' teaching. It has long since lived to see its own vindication.

But the teaching of Malthus has again appeared—neo-Malthusianism. Again it advocates the limitation of the birth-rate, not because the earth cannot support a more numerous human race, but because it seeks for a healthier race, a more perfect race, a more fit race. When families reproduce many of their kind the children do not reach full physical development. Fewer children and stronger children is its claim. Reduce the family to three or four and let these three or four be better cared for, better educated. This is neo-Malthusianism. It agrees with the old Malthusianism in the restriction of the family, but it holds out different motives.

We might approach this question from many viewpoints. What are the obligations of men and women to assume the duties of married life? Once married, is there any obligation to raise a family? Do economic conditions or ill-health excuse them from these obligations? However, we shall here consider one phase of the subject: When husband and wife make use of their marital rights, is it morally wrong by any means whatever to prevent conception or the birth of children?

The Creator has put within human beings certain tendencies and appetites for their good and preservation. The cravings of the appetite for food have their normal place. If properly satisfied, they give strength and health to the body; if abused, they injure the body. Will anyone hold that gluttony is in no way a moral question, or, being a moral question, that it is right? Will anyone assert that the old Romans were right when at their orgies they went from the banquet and vomited what they had eaten and returned to gorge themselves with peacock flesh and other dainties? Such a practice had become a custom with the

wealthy patrician families. Its very recital is disgusting. Was it simply a matter of health or a revolting practice? No, it went deeper. It was wrong because it was an abuse of nature. Nature intends hunger and appetite to rebuild the ever-weakening system; the glutton makes use of the satisfaction of the appetite for mere sensual enjoyment. Gluttony may be wrong for secondary reasons. It destroys health and brings on bodily pains and hastens death. All these things it does; but it is wrong and morally wrong because it is a misuse of nature. It takes the appetite which nature has put there for a wholesome purpose and abuses the appetite for sensual enjoyment.

Nature, too, has implanted the feeling of thirst. Like that of hunger, it is intended for the rebuilding of the body. Is it wrong to make it a means of sensual pleasure? Will anyone say that drunkenness is not an evil? Will anyone say that it is perfectly licit for a man to shut himself up within his own home and get beastly drunk, and remain so for days, provided that he does not come forth and interfere with others? Will anyone say that he has a right over his own body and may abuse it as he wishes, and that it is no one's business? Does not the drunken man do something that is intrinsically wrong—wrong whether he is alone or with others, wrong whether he is seen by others or not, wrong in itself? And in what does the wrong consist? In this, that he is acting against nature, abusing nature, taking the thing which nature intended for one purpose and using it for another.

Why is self-abuse wrong? Why is prostitution wrong? Is it simply a custom to call them wrong? Can they ever be right? We dissent entirely from those pragmatists who hold that there is no intrinsic evil, that morality and goodness are matters of custom, that what is wrong today may be right fifty years from now. Self-abuse and prostitution have always been wrong, are wrong, and always will be wrong. They are wrong from their very nature. Why? For the same reason that gluttony and drunkenness are wrong. They are against nature. They take those feelings or passions which nature has implanted in the human species for a good and holy purpose, namely, the procreation of the race, and they debase these passions to mere sensual pleasure.

Herein lies the fundamental wrong in these two curses of humanity—self-abuse and prostitution. It is true that they bring on sickness, insanity, and mental sufferings, they propagate the most horrible and loathsome diseases; but these are secondary consequences of the evils. Primarily and fundamentally they are wrong because they are a misuse of nature.

Why is an artificial restriction of birth a moral wrong? For the same reason that drunkenness is wrong, and gluttony is wrong, and self-abuse and prostitution are wrong. It is the same kind of evil, but it is a greater evil, for its relationship is more sacred. It is an abuse of nature, it is taking an action which nature meant for the propagation of the human race and degrading it to an action below the brute; for the brute never makes use of such an action except for producing its kind. This artificial restriction happens between those who should have only the holiest respect for each other's person. Dire indeed are the consequences which nature demands of those who thus abuse her gifts and blessings. These consequences are moral and physical. The moral outcome is the loss of conjugal love, the breaking of family ties, want of respect for each other in the consciousness that they are the willing participants in a heinous crime. The physical consequences fall hardest upon the female sex, leading gradually to a complication of evils and ending in sterility.

Advocates of neo-Malthusianism cannot escape these arguments. In fact, they do not attempt to meet them. The reasons which they bring forward are based upon selfishness; and their assertions are untried and unproved. We hear of mothers of fourteen or more miserable children of whom only one or two survive. There are no doubt such instances, and there are just as many instances of weaklings in families of the rich. Reference is often made to the foreign-born. But let me ask, Who are doing the manual labor in our country? Are there any signs of degeneration among these foreigners? Their ways may not be our ways—many of them are aliens among us—but they are strong of limb and muscle. Hughes in his *Tom Brown at Rugby* turns aside from his interesting story to tell the English people that they need the Browns. So do we need the Italians, the Poles, the Russian Jews

—we need all those who have come from large families. Why is the old Puritan no longer with us? Because he practiced birth restriction and disappeared from the land which should have been his. In that thoughtful book *Two and Two Make Four*, Bird Coler writes: “A century and a half of eugenics would leave the Catholic church alone in the field” (Preface, p. xii). He might have added that a century and a half of birth restriction has left the Catholics in possession of the larger part of the New England colonies.

In referring to the Catholic church in connection with birth control, I wish to point out again that I have not made use of any dogmatic teachings, although they are convincing and in harmony with sound deductions of reason. Others have given the Catholic church the credit for being the chief opponent of this social movement. Writing in the *Survey* (November 18, 1916, p. 165), Dr. Adolphus Knopf says:

I must not fail to say a word about our Catholic friends and those of other faiths who are so strongly opposed to any teaching or making public the means of contraception and limiting family increase. Let us have no word of reproach because millions of Catholics hold these views.

We accept the compliment from Dr. Knopf; and it is a real compliment. We Catholics are opposed to this social movement of birth restriction. We believe that it is against the natural law, and, being so, has no further claim. Not only will it not give us a healthier, a better generation, but it will be a slow suicide for the generation that advocates it. What would you think of the man who sought to build up the name of his family and its position in society by stealing an immense fortune. He succeeds; he is honored; his family is honored! Would you praise his success? And will you praise those who seek to elevate the human race by doing violence to the sacred instincts of nature. Woe to the nation that attempts it; for strangers will come in and fill the empty houses.

Australia and New Zealand are pointed out as countries where the experiment of birth restriction is successful. But the practice there is far from being universal; moreover, they are comparatively new countries, and the warm blood of other lands is flowing into

them. It is too soon to pronounce upon the experiment there, and the same must be said of Holland. Better examples are France and Germany. Fifty years ago the two countries had about the same population. Birth restriction has been practiced in France, but not, at least to the same extent, in Germany. The latter country has about twenty-five million more people than France. Have the Germans deteriorated in physical strength? Are there any marked changes for the better in the moral or physical status of the French? Had other nations not rushed to the aid of France, the Germans would long ago have been masters of Paris. No one can deny that if birth restriction is practiced in France for another half-century the nation will take its place as a second-class power. Has it a single definite gain? Are not its losses such as to bring a curse upon it?

After giving many authorities who favor birth control Dr. Knopf concludes his article as follows:

I believe in birth control, that is to say, birth limitation, based on medical, sanitary, ethical, moral, and economic reasons. I believe in it because with the aid of it man and woman can decide when to have a child, work and prepare for its arrival, welcome it as the fulfilment of the heart's desire, watch over it, tenderly care for and educate it, and raise it to be what every child is destined to be—a being, happy, healthy, strong in mind, body, and soul.

If we but use our God-given sense to regulate the affairs of the government and family wisely and economically, this great world of ours will be one of plenty and beauty, where the good will predominate over the evil and the children born of it will become men and women only a little lower than the angels—images of their creator.

Let us not confuse the issue. This neo-Malthusianism advocates artificial prevention of conception while man and wife are making use of marital rights. Married people can refrain from the use of these rights, and in that sense there is no ethical objection to family regulation; in that sense they may decide when to have a child. They should restrain themselves in conjugal relations.¹ This is in keeping with the mandates of nature and the Creator. In this way children born to them will be little less than angels. But if these same parents make use of their marital rights, and

¹Thomas J. Gerrard, *Marriage and Parenthood—the Catholic Ideal*. New York: Wagner. Chapter vii, on "Conjugal Restraint," deserves careful reading.

at the same time by contraception prevent conception or bring about an abortion, they are sinning against nature. The husband is no better than the man who frequents the brothel to satisfy his lower appetite, and the wife is no better than the prostitute who sells her body for immoral purposes. Man and wife are here imitating the most degraded actions of depraved society. Wedlock in no way gives them the privilege of abusing nature and frustrating the essential end of matrimony.

In his paper Dr. Knopf refers to the infant mortality among children of the poor at Johnstown, Pennsylvania. To the disgrace of our civilization be it said that the toiling classes of Johnstown and elsewhere in the United States have been overworked and underfed. And they have been underfed because they have been underpaid. We do need a propaganda for the poor man, but it is not a propaganda to restrict his offspring, but a propaganda to give him a decent wage—a wage that will enable him to have a home, to clothe and feed his family; we need a social insurance in its best forms; we need co-operation and profit-sharing—all these things we need to give the toiler the just reward of his labor. Then will infant mortality, tuberculosis, and poor housing disappear. Neo-Malthusianism has no solution for the complex social evils of the poor man. It is a doctrine that is ethically wrong and will come as a curse to the nation that adopts its false and misleading principles.

In conclusion, birth restriction will never meet the approval of the Catholic church. Individuals in that church may be misled by those who advocate it, but it can never become general within the church. If then those who are without the church should adopt this ethical code, and if it should become general with them, they will be the losers. Their progeny will gradually disappear from the face of the earth, while other and more fruitful nations will possess the land.